The Achievement of an Actress

THE revealing story of one of our leading actresses, of her struggles to attain the position she holds. It is a business success story, showing once more the necessity of work if one is to reach the goal of one's ambition.

By FAY BAINTER

A GIRL came to my dressing-room a short time ago, and when she was seated, she announced the reason for her visit. "I've come to talk with you about being an actress." She smiled sweetly. "I thought possibly you could give me a rôle in your play where I could wear some decent clothes—a good evening dress."

I quite understood her longing for handsome clothes—every woman can.

"Have you ever played a part?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, I was in all our college dramatics. I specialized in English and we used to act our plays in class. They all said I was a splendid "Juliet."

"But the rôle that you mean," I answered, "the one of the girl who wears handsome clothes, is being very well played by a competent young actress. We couldn't discharge her, you know."

"Oh, no—but——" she stopped, and then came the old, old cry, "I suppose that you have to have a pull to get a place on the stage, don't you?"

"Not at all, but it is hard for a beginner to get a place in a big production. The thing for you to do—"

"But how can I get experience?"

"I was just about to tell you. Go into a small stock company, and work very, very hard—"

"Oh—I'd never play stock," she shook her head. "I don't *have* to act, you know, and stock must be terrible work. I know a man who played in stock. He says that you have to do three or four matinees a week, and then rehearse all the rest of the time for the next play."

"Well, you won't get anywhere without work," I argued.

She shrugged her shoulders, and mentioned the colors in my kimona which was hanging against the screen. Two or three minutes later she left. She had not given up the idea of going on the stage, but she had wasted my time and scoffed at my advice. And for the rest of her life she'll say that the stars of the theater kept her from being a success. Foolish, isn't it? But so very, very typical of hundreds, thousands of women. Every morning, all over the world women waken and decide that they are going to be actresses. They think that all they have to do is to make up their own minds. If they only knew—if they could only glimpse behind the scenes at any man or woman who has succeeded in the theatrical profession, or any other profession! Work! No matter if you go into selling shoes, being a Wall Street banker, or acting, you have to work.

Of course, there are vastly different reasons for working. Many a woman has succeeded as an actress because she loved the stage life sufficiently to climb the hard road—others have followed the footlights only because they needed the money and were not happy at the thought of being a private secretary, or a saleswoman. My reason for going on the stage was because the money I might earn was needed to help keep me clothed and fed. I was five years old, and like many another youngster I had taken part in amateur entertainments. I was generally accredited with extraordinary talent. I can't say whether it was true—all I remember was that I had a lovely doll I used to carry to the theater. Its welfare was of much more concern than my professional appearance. I have a dim recollection of it all—the dark theater where the Morosco Stock Company rehearsed, the strange people, and a man and woman who told me what they wanted me to do. The woman was Nance O'Neil. She was playing a series of special engagements with a Los Angeles Stock Company, and the play in which I appeared was one of her great successes, "The Jewess." So you see in the making of myself as an actress, I was fortunate enough to have a great example at the very start of my career, and even though I did not realize the fact, I was laying the foundation of a stage career.

FAY BAINTER

I MIGHT go into some detail and tell of the work of the next nine years, but they were only the foundation. The structure was to come later. Imagine it—nine years of children's parts. Many people have expressed the wonder that I kept at it—that child-like I did not become rebellious and refuse to act, and so be discharged—that I did not develop such a hatred of the theater that I should never want to see it again.

You see, the reason for my continuation in my stage work was two-fold. I had to eat or die from starvation, and I had grown to love the stage, grown to be truly ambitious for a great career.

And, after all, they were not hard years. I was a favorite of the company—a child—and every man and woman in the place petted and cared for me. Many a rehearsal was made less irksome by a tempting piece of fruit, cake or candy. The director refused to let even the stage hands swear in my presence, and they obeyed him. Also, my mother escorted me back and forth from the theater.

However, at the time all this meant nothing to me. It is only now, years after, that I realize the kindness of the people with whom I worked.

Then came the day when I was too tall to play children's parts—when I was to leave the Morosco Stock Company with its familiar walls, and obtain a place in another company where I was to play "grown-up" rôles. It was not difficult for me to get this. For three years I played as a minor member of stock companies in Seattle and Portland. They were only ingenue rôles, but they fed my ambition, which was sprouting toward Broadway as a plant to the sun.

They were growing years. As I remember them they added no distinct shock of stage experiences to my life, but they must have helped me. I had a fair salary, and while my parts were never of importance, they all brought their atom of experience. And I dreamed. Many a night when there was a small house, and the part assigned to me was uninteresting, I used to think of the days when I would be a leading lady in a wonderful production, and wearing a gown of such marvelous material and lines that every woman in the house would envy me. You see, I, too, loved pretty clothes.

Finally I reached the age of seventeen. I was a woman—or thought I was. Other girls were chattering of junior proms, and graduation dresses. I was thinking of New York City—three thousand miles across the continent, and my savings. One day I gave the company manager notice. I was finished with being a stock ingenue, and, after buying several feet of railroad ticket, I proceeded on my—I almost said, triumphant way. That would have been wrong. When I reached New York City, I had just three hundred dollars, and I was frightened, scared, but very determined. I walked out of the station, past the big hotels that I knew could not house me, and found a cheap little boarding-house, in the neighborhood which I knew from hearing the conversation of other players, harbored theatrical people.

I had my suit pressed, straightened the bows on my hat, and started out to find work. It sounds so easy, but only when one has traveled from one manager's office to another, and been absolutely ignored, can one understand what such a search means. Looking back on these months I know now why they did not notice me. I was badly dressed, absolutely unprepossessing. How can a girl look attractive when she has to wash out her only pair of silk stockings every night, and dry her handkerchiefs on the mirror of her room? I had a single dress waist, and after a few days it was no longer fresh. And I had no money to buy another. That added to my lack of charm.

Weeks passed. I found no work, but I had discovered which drug stores sold hot drinks for a nickel, and that onions were very nourishing, also inexpensive. Also that one could buy stale brown bread cheaper than the usual cost of such a loaf. Oh, it wasn't *easy!* Only the stubborn soul of youth kept me from crying failure; only the grim determination that makes one hang on, bid me strive still further for success.

Then came a day when I read that my old manager, Mr. John Cort, was in New York, and producing a musical play. I went to him, rushed to him as one does to a friend, and my luck turned. I was given a small part. It was in a musical play, "The Rose of Panama," and while my rôle was small, it would mean a regular salary each week, *if the play was a success.* Also, *if I was retained.* It looked for weeks as if I would be sent away during rehearsals, for, for the first time, I met with the worst thing that the theater holds, a mean, unfair stage director.

I will admit that I was not a stage beauty, that I was not even attractive. I was only past seventeen, awkward to a certain degree, small face, huge eyes, and scared of my own shadow. The director had another girl that he thought would fit the part given me, and so he decided that as long as Mr. Cort had engaged me, he would first have to prove me inefficient before he discharged me. He used to overwork me, be unfair in his criticisms, and when they did not crush me as he had hoped, he started to make me the laughingstock of the company thinking my wounded pride would force me to leave the rehearsals. He didn't know, however, that very often I came to rehearsals with only a slice of bread and a cup of hot ginger for my breakfast—ginger being more nourishing, and five cents cheaper than chocolate. He didn't know that I was going to hang on in spite of him, that I had to hang on or die of starvation. Yet, in a sense, that bully made me a success, for all through the years I have remembered him, and I have climbed up, hoping for the hour when his path crosses mine, and I shall be able, in my own way, to repay him for his cowardice.

FINALLY the day of the dress rehearsal arrived. Mr. Cort was there. He met me in the wings, and told me that while the director did not like my acting he was going to allow me to play the first night, and that if I made a success I could play the part.

I had had a very light supper the night the play opened, and had just twenty cents left in my pocketbook. I shared a dressing-room with a superior person who was very elegant as to clothing, and loud as to her sneers for me. What did I care? By the time I had my make-up on, and was dressed for the stage, I was in such a towering rage that I could have beaten the champion prize fighter of the minute. I went on the stage with my fists doubled to knock cold the star, the director, or the audience, if they didn't like me, and I won. It was no triumph, but I had made my appearance in a New York production—and kept my job.

The job did not mean a great deal, for the play was not a great success in New York. It lasted three weeks, and went on the road, landing in Chicago, where it had a run.

Spring came, and the disbanding for the season. I was fortunate enough to have the offer of the leading woman's part with a stock company in Toledo. I was only eighteen but thirteen years of work had left their effect. I could memorize a long part with ease. I knew the gestures that display the varying emotions, and I was able to imitate the tricks in voice that I had heard other actresses use. All these are assets in stock. I was under contract to Mr. Cort for the following season, but as my stock work progressed, I realized more and more that I did not belong in a musical comedy. So, one day, summoning my courage, I wrote him, and asked if he would release me from my musical comedy contract and give me a part in a dramatic production. I read his answer nearly two weeks later—one of the first letters I opened when I was sufficiently convalescent from an attack of appendicitis to read. He agreed with me regarding my work in musical comedies, and thought it would be better for both of us if the contract were cancelled. He made no mention, however, of dramatic work.

I grew well rapidly; I had to. And I went back to work. Worked! A dreary round of stock work, mostly with inferior companies, where the object was to rush on a play as best possible in the shortest time. I saved and stinted, and made a yearly pilgrimage into New York in search of work. Once I reached what I thought was a form of heaven, for I attained an engagement with Mrs. Fiske to play in "Mrs. Bumpstead Leigh." Dear Mrs. Fiske! I owe so much to her. I was only an immature girl, but she must have seen the fires of ambition that were burning within me. I was not conscious of the fact, but my natural gift for mimicry made me ape everything she did. She was aware of it, and might have snubbed me—sent me away in disgrace. Instead, she invited me to her dressing-room, and advised me to leave her company. She said that playing a small part would never teach me all that I ought to know, and she advised a few seasons in a stock company. I confess that I laughed. Stock! After more than fifteen years of fighting my way out of stock, I was being advised to go back! Mrs. Fiske was kind, and she was patient. She showed me that there was such a thing as mechanically playing a rôle, and then there was the true study. She gave me many valuable points on how to get the best out of every rôle. She said that she knew that in stock companies I had always been tired, and had learned my lines and played the rôles mechanically. Now I must change my work. Then I argued that one could not do good work in a stock company when one had poor clothing, insufficient stage properties and poor scenery.

"Use your imagination," she cried. "Believe that you have everything to work with, and play in the same key."

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